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ABSTRACT

A national curriculum in physical education for the elementary and secondary schools will not solve the problems prevalent in current physical education curricula. In terms of feasibility, it is not clear that a consensus could be reached among physical educators or that a national curriculum could change local programs, or that it could be disseminated at the local level. A national physical education curriculum might be established through a state-by-state effort to develop curriculum regulations consistent with national curriculum guidelines, or perhaps accreditation standards could facilitate the implementation of a national curriculum. In terms of desirability of a national physical education curriculum, there is the technical question of whether such a curriculum, once implemented, could produce the desired results and also the moral/ethical commitments of the profession. Instead of working toward a national curriculum, physical educators should, on a local collective basis, collaborate to improve the quality of physical education programs in their area. (CB)

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Risks of a National Curriculum

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A funny thing happened on the way to the forum. Two weeks ago, as I was in the midst of preparing this paper, I received a letter from Stan Brassie, President of the National Association for Sport and Physical Education (NASPE), inviting me to serve on a task force to (1) develop a rationale for describing a physically educated person and (2) develop competencies for school age children, K-12, at appropriate periodic intervals. I declined the invitation. Today I am going to try to explain why.

Let me begin my explanation by acknowledging that physical education has serious problems. I will also agree with Hal Lawson that the solutions to those problems require not merely individual effort but structural change. However, my analysis leads me to believe that a national curriculum will not solve our problems and will in fact move us in the wrong direction.

Debate about any proposed educational innovation centers around two issues: feasibility and desirability. My analysis today will address both. However, before we can discuss the pros and cons of a national curriculum, we need to clarify what is meant. When Lawson first proposed a national curriculum at the 1985 Curriculum Theory Conference (Lawson 1985), he indicated that he was not suggesting a rigid model but a blueprint to guide local decision-making. He recommended that we search for a fundamental consensus on the nature and purpose of physical education and develop a structure in which advocates for competing models can find harmony. While he indicated that such a national curriculum would not lead to standardization, he suggested that it will provide

"horizontal and vertical articulation", "a reasonable common denominator of experiences, knowledge, and skills", "a set of goals and objectives providing for prescribed learning", and "a mechanism for quality control" (Lawson, 1985, p. 380). His proposal today for a curriculum which defines a physically educated person by identifying intended learning outcomes sequenced across grade levels is consistent with his earlier comments and, interestingly, with the charge to the NASPE task force (Lawson 1986).

A useful way of examining a national curriculum may be to think of it as what Komisar and McClellan (1961) have called a slogan system. A slogan is a broad, prescriptive statement that is inherently ambiguous e.g. educating the whole child, back to the basics, learning how to learn. Individuals or groups give the slogan an interpretation by defining what educational practices they think the slogan implies, and different groups may have various interpretations of the same slogan. A slogan system is a set of related slogans that attempts to convey a comprehensive view of desirable educational activity. Although a network of related slogans may give clues as to the intended interpretation, the meaning remains ambiguous and cannot be logically deduced from the slogans. The only way to reduce the ambiguity is for a particular group of people to decide what it means and to communicate that meaning by giving practical examples. Statements of general philosophy are uninterpreted slogan systems. Lists of intended learning outcomes represent an effort to interpret the slogan system by giving it specific meaning.

Slogans and slogan systems can be quite useful. Scheffler (1960, p. 36) indicates that slogans can "provide rallying symbols of the key ideas and attitudes of educational movements." This ability to attract widespread support for programs and ideas may depend in part on vagueness which allows each individual or group to give the slogan its own particular interpretation (Komisar & McClellan 1961). That is, the more general the statement, the more likely we are to agree with it and with each other. As our particular interpretations emerge, our disagreements become visible and consensus is likely to dissolve. So if one's purpose is to generate consensus and rally support, the best strategy seems to be to develop slogan systems which retain their vagueness and ambiguity.

However, Komisar and McClellan (1961, p. 212) suggest that "whether or not teachers and administrators are actually influenced by the theory is apt to depend upon the presence of specific proposals." Apple (1971, p. 507) states that a limitation of slogans is that "the meaning of the symbol is so broadened by its various interpretations that its genesis and original meaning are lost." Thus the dilema that confronts the developers of slogan systems is to be vague enough to attract broad support and specific enough to direct practice. It is this dilema which is at the center of the feasibility issues related to the proposed national curriculum.

The key questions related to feasibility are: Can we reach consensus? and Can a national curriculum change local programs? The answer to the first question seems to depend upon the level of specificity of the document being developed. AAHPERD has previously developed and published documents defining physical education and prescribing quality programs: This is Physical Education (1965), Essentials of a Quality Elementary School Physical Education Program (198), Guidelines for Secondary School Physical Education (1979) and others. Each of these documents is a general statement of philosophy, that is, a slogan system. It is uncertain whether a document with greater specificity, such as the national curriculum currently being proposed, would win Alliance endorsement as easily as these more general statements. It should also be noted that each of these documents received approval from the officers of AAHPERD, but one might question the degree to which any of these has achieved grassroots consensus and become a "rallying symbol" for the profession. That is, the language and the slogans of these documents has only slightly permeated local discussions about physical education programs. Perhaps the most noticeable recent exception is "health-related fitness", a slogan that has made its way into many local physical education documents if not into programs (National Children and Youth Fitness Study, 1985).

The more complex feasibility question is whether a national curriculum can change local physical education programs throughout the nation. The success of such an effort seems dependent on the clarity and practicality of the document itself and on the effectiveness of the mechanisms of dissemination and control. Research on teachers'

willingness to implement educational innovations seems to support the need for specifics and practical examples to effect change at the local level (Doyle & Ponder 1977). The price for achieving consensus in the first place is often to render the document so general and vague that it cannot guide practice. Efforts to make the document more specific are often resisted either because of disagreement about particulars or because of objections to a "cookbook" approach to curriculum development. Lawson seems to be recommending curriculum guidelines that are more specific than those in previous AAHPERD documents but attempting to avoid a rigid, standardized prescription. Whether this can be accomplished seems to be a major feasibility issue.

The other major issue related to feasibility is how a national curriculum, once developed, is to be disseminated in order to influence local programs. In other subject areas, several mechanisms can be identified that have led to a more standardized curriculum if not a national curriculum per se. The primary ones are commercial textbooks, standardized achievement tests, state regulations, and accreditation standards. Commercial textbooks are not a viable option for influencing elementary and secondary school physical education programs. Neither, in general, are standardized achievement tests although one might argue that the increased attention being given to fitness is due in part to the availability of standardized tests in an era of accountability. This leaves the options of state regulations or accreditation standards.

One strategy would be for AAHPERD to make a state by state effort to develop curriculum regulations consistent with the guidelines specified in the national curriculum. Recent educational reform movements have led to a shift in the balance of power with declining local control and increasing state control of education (Kirst 1984). Initial impressions are that physical education has been losing not gaining ground, and that the politicians who play a central role in state reform movements see "academics" not health, physical education or the arts as the cornerstone of educational reform. However, state regulation remains one possibility for implementation of a national curriculum, but it should be noted that existing regulations regarding time requirements for physical education are routinely circumvented in many states with no penalty. State regulations will be meaningless unless there is a commitment to enforcing them.

Another possibility for establishing a national curriculum is through accreditation standards. AAHPERD could implement its own accreditation process or attempt to have existing accreditation agencies use the standards it develops. After careful examination of the feasibility of accreditation of college and university physical education programs, NASPE and AAHPERD decided not to become involved in accreditation and to work with NCATE to influence the accreditation of physical education teacher education programs. The latter effort has not been without controversy, and it remains to be seen how effectively NCATE will enforce the AAHPERD standards. One of the essential conditions is having physical educators with the expertise to interpret the standards

involved in the accreditation process. The problems of accreditation of approximately 700 college and university programs have been complex, but the accreditation of thousands of elementary and secondary physical education programs seems insurmountable.

If state regulation or accreditation seem impractical or undesirable, the other possibility is that AAHPERD could try to directly market a national curriculum to its constituency in order to secure voluntary implementation throughout the country. Is this possible? How would it be done? One example of such a dissemination effort is the NASPE Basic Stuff project. The project has employed the usual tactics of direct sales of publications and extensive publicity through JOPERD and the national convention. In addition, a national committee responsible for dissemination has worked with a network of state Basic Stuff coordinators to set up state and local workshops. Despite these rather extensive efforts, the impact of the Basic Stuff project upon local physical education programs appears to have been minimal. Although it could be interpreted as a rejection of the product itself, the low impact of Basic Stuff does make clear that national dissemination of curriculum proposals is extremely difficult.

In summary, the feasibility of a national curriculum seems doubtful. Developing curricular guidelines which can attract widespread support and influence local physical education programs throughout the nation seems beyond the realm of possibility. But let's set aside for the moment the question of feasibility. Let's assume it could be done. Would it be a good thing to do?

The question of desirability of a national curriculum is both a technical issue and a moral-ethical issue. The technical question is whether a national curriculum once implemented can indeed produce the promised results. The moral-ethical question is whether the effects of a national curriculum, both intended and unintended, are consistent with our moral and ethical commitments.

We can begin with the technical question. What are the promised results and would an effectively implemented national curriculum produce those results? In his presentation at the 1985 Curriculum Theory Conference, Lawson described the following potential benefits of a national curriculum:

1. Continuity and consistency in physical education programs making student transfer from school to school easier.

2. Improved teaching because of clearer expectations for student learning (with proposed side effect of greater teacher retention).

3. Differentiation of physical education from athletics, perhaps reducing role stress of teacher-coaches.

4. Improved teacher education because of greater homogeneity of recruits and reduced likelihood that school experiences will "wash out" effects of teacher education.

Is it realistic to expect these things to happen if we had a national curriculum in physical education? Presumably such a national curriculum would increase the homogeneity among public school programs, teacher education programs, and physical education teachers. Would such homogeneity improve the quality of teaching and teacher education? To what extent is diversity the cause of lack of administrative support and program resources or lack of teacher commitment and skills? Is teacher-coach role conflict a result of the failure to differentiate physical education and athletics or of unreasonable time demands and overemphasis on athletics? While most of us would agree that there are serious issues regarding the quality of physical education programs, there is no compelling evidence that diversity is the source of these problems nor that homogeneity is the solution.

Research on effective schools has suggested that teachers need to understand and be committed to a shared set of purposes, but that school improvement has to be planned and implemented at the building level (Tyler 1983; Kirst 1984). Finn (1984, p. 520) suggests that "standards cannot substitute for - nor in themselves create- the commitment, character, and shared values that must be embodied in the very ethos of the institution". Apple (1983) proposes that teachers who are asked to implement curriculum conceived outside the school will lose the very things that make teaching a professional activity, the ability to plan and contol one's own work. The premise that a national curriculum would improve the quality of teaching in local schools does not seem consistent with the research on effective schooling.

In addition to technical questions about effectiveness, one can also raise moral-ethical questions about the desirability of a national curriculum. Passow (1984, p. 680) raises a question related to proposals for a common curriculum that seems to have relevance for our discussion: "Are a common curriculum and uniform requirements appropriate for a pluralistic society?" Educational policy decisions, including decisions about curriculum, are "political acts, attempts to balance competing interests within the school by considering the current balances being struck in the society without". (Deasy 1984, p.5) Participation in decision-making is an essential safeguard of the rights of diverse groups and also has the practical value of providing ownership of the decision and mobilizing support for its implementation. Although special interest groups might be represented in the planning of a national curriculum, it would be impossible to develop a process which adequately represented the diversity in each of our local communities.

The argument just made assumes that local participation in decision-making is essential in order for the result, the curriculum, to represent the interests of the diverse population to be served. Perhaps an even more compelling moral-ethical argument is the assertion that bureaucratic decision-making is inherently dehumanizing. Ferguson (1984, p. 51) proposes that decentralized and participatory decision-making are essential to "satisy both the needs for autonomy and control and the needs for intimacy and connectedness". In effect she is arguing that the issue is not just the quality of the decision (in this case, the quality and relevance of the national curriculum), but that participation in the decision-making process is itself an important human right.

At this point, I want to acknowledge Lawson's assertion that he is not advocating an end to local decision-making in physical education programs. However, a national curriculum which defined goals and objectives and a common denominator of experiences, knowledge, and skills would seem to relegate local decision-making to technical questions of means rather than philosophical questions of value. I would suggest that to do so will reduce the professional status of physical education teachers and will exacerbate not solve the problems confronting us.

So what is our alternative? Am I proposing that we ignore the problems or that we continue to assume that individual teachers can reform programs and schools? I agree with Lawson's assumption that the source of the problem is the social order and that the solution requires collective not just individual action. His description of the institutionalization of physical education is insightful and useful. But despite his criticisms, his proposed solution is to increase the bureaucracy and institutionalization by establishing a national curriculum. My suggestion is that our goal needs to be the opposite, to do everything we can to decrease bureaucracy and to empower groups at the local level to take action. Ferguson (1984, p. 29) suggests that we tend to view bureaucracy as inevitable but that, "Change emerges out of people's confrontations with the existing social arrangements; coming up against institutionalized limitations in a personal way, not simply in theory or at a distance, opens the way to resistance. But to encounter bureaucracy only on its own terms, to confront it within its own discourse, is to forfeit the struggle." You can't fight bureaucracy with more bureaucracy!

What can AAHPERD do to empower physical education teachers to create their own local reform movements? It can use its bureaucratic power to deal with other bureaucracies (e.g. state agencies) to protect our space in the curriculum and to prevent them from interfering with our work. It can provide, at the local and state level, opportunities for face-to-face interactions essential to the development of a shared vision and commitment. To some extent, what AAHPERD can also do is to provide effective slogans, that is general statements of belief which can serve as emotional rallying points, which can reassure us of the importance and the value of what we do.

What can you and I do? We can begin local collaborative efforts to improve the quality of physical education programs in our communities. Two examples come to mind. Dolly Lambdin at the University of Texas at Austin has organized monthly sessions for elementary physical education teachers in the Austin area in which teachers share their ideas, frustrations, and successes. William Anderson at Teachers College, Columbia University has established a Physical Education Program Development Center in which graduate students from Columbia work with school physical education teachers to help them achieve improvement objectives identified by the teachers (Schwager & Anderson 1983). While such projects are often initiated by university faculty, their success depends upon the extent to which the teachers are equal partners. Top down reform does not work, even at the local level.

To be effective, such local reform movements also cannot limit their efforts to the improvement of individual teachers' skills while ignoring the conditions under which they teach. While an apolitical focus on individual improvement is safer, I concur with Hal that the safe course is not always the best course. Genuine improvement of physical education programs will require us to enter the arena of local school politics to win the support necessary for quality programs and to work collectively with our colleagues to build programs of which we can be proud. In the long run, that is both riskier and more effective than a national curriculum.

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